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ABSTRACT

The significance/importance of relationships and connection of women in working through emotional distress and building personal empowerment is illustrated in the process model. The group process model of empowerment draws from both the current theories of women's psychological development and social interaction theory in illustrating the process toward empowerment occurring in females in group settings. A shelter group, designed for battered women, can provide the genesis for self-empowerment, a missing component in the adult development for most of these women. The evaluation of other women's groups demonstrates the occurrence of the empowerment process in diverse group settings. The process of instilling compassion for oneself and others, and engaging in mutually satisfying and empowering relationships can enrich the understanding of women's groups for work, study, support, peer supervision, friendship, business, research, activity, political action, governance, and peace keeping. Personal empowerment for women is essential to changing the institutional and societal conditions that currently contribute to the "disempowerment" of women. The process model can serve to structure and enhance groups designed for women's empowerment. For where women gather together, there exists a potentially fertile environment to develop connections and to attain personal empowerment. (ABL)

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A process model of empowerment for women in group settings.

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Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the process of personal empowerment occurring in a support group conducted for women who are victims of domestic violence. Empowerment of the women is the main objective of the group. The role of the group facilitator is explained, the goals of the group experience are detailed, and the group's format is described. Most importantly, the process that occurs to achieve the objective of empowerment is described and illustrated in a process model of personal empowerment. Recent theoretical perspectives of female development and social learning ecology are applied to the process of the women's group experience and the empowerment model. Other possible applications of the process model in diverse women's groups are identified.

This paper is an analysis of the process of personal empowerment occurring in a support group for battered women conducted as part of a shelter program providing housing and advocacy for women who are victims of domestic violence. The main objective of the program is the empowerment of the women through advocacy and support offered individually and in group settings. Most importantly, the process that occurs to achieve the objective of empowerment is described and illustrated in an empowerment model. Several other applications of the empowerment process occurring for women in group settings are examined and evaluated.

Battered women constitute a core group of traditionally "unempowered" people within a community, individually, institutionally and societally. The current statistics indicate that there is a significant problem of domestic violence against women in our society. Currently, in the United States, every 15 seconds a woman is beaten. One out of four American couples experience at least one violent episode during their marriage. One out of eight murders in the U. S. is a spouse killing. (Gilliland and James, 1988). In Massachusetts, statistics for the first five months of 1992 reveal that every eight days a woman is killed by her spouse or boyfriend (Boston Globe, May 27, 1992). According to Sarah Buel (1990), of the Massachusetts, Norfolk County District Attorney's office, more women seek emergency room assistance for injuries received in domestic violence episodes than from injuries received in all auto accidents, muggings, and rapes

combined. In other words, in some cases, a woman is safer on the streets than she is in her own home. Truly, these women constitute an "unempowered" group in today's society.

Most battered women, in order to leave violence, primarily need safety and support. Women are injured and isolated from all other relationships by men's real or threatened violence in a battering situation. The batterer often insists that the woman disassociate herself from family and friends as part of the control he attempts to exercise over her. This coercion is reinforced by her own withdrawal from family and acquaintances for fear of reprisals from the abuser and having her shameful situation known to others.

These women feel isolated and dependent and blame themselves for their situations. "They need recognition that their experience is shared and that their problem is social and political, not individual. ....(they need) a safe place to stay and the support and understanding of other women" (Sullivan and Weiss, 1981, p. 23). In order to remain free from the original violent situation and/or becoming involved in a new violent relationship these women need empowerment. A shelter support group, designed for battered women, can provide the genesis for self empowerment, a missing component of adult development for most of these women.

Empowerment of Women in Group Settings

Personal Empowerment through Connection

Recent feminist theory (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldenberger & Tarule, 1986; Fedele & Harrington, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991; Miller, 1987) suggests the inner sense of connection to others as a central organizing feature of women's development. Chodorow (1974) proposes that, in any given society, feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people. A woman's sense of self and of worth is grounded in the ability to make and maintain relationships (Miller, 1987). When the only person available in a relational context (the batterer) carries out disconnection and violation of the woman's relational connections, the woman is not able to develop and grow in the way she knows. Development, growth, and sense of self are foreclosed, and the woman becomes powerless and easily victimized.

Surrey (1987) suggests the goal of development for women is the increasing ability to build and strengthen mutually enhancing relationships. When a woman is grossly abused or attacked and when the surrounding relational context is unresponsive to the woman's expression of her experience, disconnection occurs. The woman is prevented from participating in mutually responsive and mutually enhancing relationships. Disconnection limits a female's ability to act within connection, to know one's own experience and to build a sense

of competence. The immediate consequences of disconnection and violation include an inhibition of the ability to act, stemming from a sense that action within a relationship may lead to greater trouble/pain (Miller, 1988). There follows a loss of clarity in knowledge of self, a diminished sense of self-worth, a decrease in energy, and finally, and perhaps most importantly, a confusing sense of isolation in which the person feels locked out of the possibility of real connection. The long-term consequences include seriously distorted views of self and other, inability to express certain feelings, over reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms, and both isolation and/or unfulfilling attachments. Groups are particularly suited to heal these relational wounds.

The necessary processes of adult development in women, according to Surrey (1984), are mutual engagement (or interest), mutual empathy and mutual empowerment. These processes are all dynamic components of a shelter support group. An integral part of the support offered to battered women within the shelter, individually and within groups, is the concept of empowerment. Battered women have been led to feel they are worthless, stupid, incapable, and responsible for the pain they feel. Therefore, a support program must counter these beliefs and help women gain a sense of personal power and competence.

The empowerment, achieved through the group process, enables the women to begin to plan their own lives, to make conscious

decisions about realistic goals and how they might achieve them. It also means taking responsibility for their own actions while recognizing that they are not to blame for the violence done to them. Empowerment is created by and, in turn, reinforces the competency and action necessary to move from the recent violent situation to an improved life situation.

Ecology of Social Learning

Support groups that are participatory, politicizing, informational, empathic, and even fun have been developed to facilitate empowerment. Schecter, Szymanski, & Cahill, (1985) describe a format for empowerment groups. This format allows the women to share their experiences with other battered women, develop an analysis of violence and, at the same time, find concrete solutions for their problems with abusive men and non-supportive institutions. Involvement, as well as new information, ideas and hope, is an important component of this format. The involvement allows the women to make connections.

The ecology of the shelter support group provides a secure setting where the women can move toward empowerment enhanced by their involvement and interactions. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory includes a model of reciprocal causation, in which action, cognitive, affective and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants. The

social-learning environment of the group provides fertile ground for the growth and development of agency, competency and motivation toward action.

A comprehensive strategy is needed to help move from a state of emotional, psychological and economic dependence on the abuser toward a state of personal and psychological empowerment and economic independence. After leaving violent homes, battered women need to learn to build their sense of self, tap into their inner strengths, consider options, learn appropriate decision making, problem solving, and interpersonal skills to start a new life.

The group approach is used based on the assumption that a group will provide mutual support, new models of relating, opportunity to trust and relate to others in the same predicament, commonality of experience, and role models (Corey & Corey, 1987; Drum & Knott, 1977; Ibrahim & Kerr, 1987,). It also serves as an ideal forum to foster and develop connections, believed to be vital to the process of development and empowerment in women. Miller (1987) has described how mutually empathic and empowering relationships foster growth on at least five dimensions. Each participant feels more energy, becomes more able to act, knows herself and others more accurately, and feels a greater sense of self-worth and a heightened experience of connection.

The battered woman must gain a sense of control and active participation in her life in order to move away from the passivity and

dependency she experienced in the battering situation. The support group is a safe and comfortable place to begin this process. Both Miller (1987) and Surrey (1987) have emphasized the empowering effects of interaction in mutually empathic relationships and have urged the creation and sustaining of such relational contexts for women. Clearly, women's groups provide rich opportunities for empowering connectedness as members take in the relational energy, power, and effectiveness of the group (Fedele & Harrington, 1990).

Process Model of Personal Empowerment

Connections which foster mutuality heal (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991). Mutuality involves an appreciation of the wholeness of the other person's experience and respect for the other person's differentness and uniqueness. It also involves an openness to the other's impact on oneself and an appreciation of one's impact on the other. A relational approach to group support suggests that groups which foster particular types of connections between people promote psychological growth and the healing of emotional wounds. The work of the writers at the Stone Center at Wellesley College proposes four salient factors in women's therapy groups. These include validation of one's experience, empowerment to act in relationships, development of self-empathy, and mutuality (Fedele & Harrington, 1990). The factors of intensity and commonality occurring

within a support group combined with the theoretical perspectives of relational connection contribute to building self-esteem and personal empowerment.

For one and one half years, the first author worked as a staff member at a battered women's shelter while enrolled in a graduate Community/Social Psychology program. During this concurrent experience, linkages between theory and practice were identified. The result has been the development of this model illustrating the process of personal empowerment. The process is a fluid movement, occurring almost simultaneously along two vectors, representing internal and external processes. The internal process occurs on a cognitive level within each individual participant. The external process occurs on a cognitive level within the group in a social-learning environment. Starting with commonality of past and present situations as the base and moving through the experiences of: (1) self-evaluation, (2) disclosure, (3) insight, (4) mutuality, (5) competence and (6) action, personal empowerment is achieved. All of this movement occurs in and is enhanced by the relational context of connection.

Insert Figure 1.

In the group setting, with commonality of experience as the starting point, a newcomer listens to others relate their experiences and she begins a self-evaluation, attempting to determine where her past

experiences fit in with the other group members' stories. Next, she will disclose her own story to an empathic and supportive audience. The relating of "her story" in this validating, dynamic setting creates an insight through mutually empathic feedback. Mutuality within the group is created and strengthened, the woman gains a sense of competency as she interacts within the group and she is moved toward action to rebuild her life. This action reinforces the growing sense of energy, power and effectiveness obtained from the group experience. Mutual relational connection is the essential factor fostering the woman's movement through this process toward empowerment. The process is progressive, yet fluid, and does not necessarily take place in a step or stage progression or in one grand sweeping motion from start to finish. It happens differently for each woman, in her own time frame. This model represents a visual illustration of the dynamic, fluid movement toward personal empowerment in a group setting.

Diverse Women's Groups

The Domestic Violence Support Group

The shelter support group focusing on domestic violence issues meets on a weekly basis. The group participants are residents of the shelter who have been screened upon admittance and are therefore free from complicating issues such as current substance abuse and mental illness (psychoses). The total population of the shelter at any

given time is 8 women and their children, so the number of participants in the group usually ranges from 4 to 8 women. The maximum length of stay is usually 6 weeks for single women and 8 weeks for women with children. Occasionally, the length of stay will be extended. Most of the residents have made a decision to permanently leave their abusive situation and build a new life. The vast majority have experienced isolation and disconnection from "normal" relationships as a result of domestic violence. These women share the commonality of past and present experiences.

The group norms stress member control of the amount of individual participation and the focus of discussion. The facilitator plays an important role in keeping the group focused and functioning, however the group experience itself is the central feature of group activity.

All workshops or sessions are divided into 3 sections; the problem, the cause, and the empowerment (Schecter, et al., 1985). In the first section, the problem, the women share their problems and personal experiences. In the causal section, the women are asked key questions like "how, what and why", to raise consciousness as to the causes of abuse, feelings of guilt, and other concerns the women may have. In the empowerment section, the members share ideas and seek solutions to the problems they have and brainstorm ways to change the systems that cause the problems. The facilitator assumes responsibility for each session ending on an empowering experience. This insures

that if a resident moves from the shelter in between group sessions, her group experience will have ended on a positive note.

Some of the topics used in planned sessions include: (1) Exploring abusive behavior, (2) Why do men get away with violence against women, (3) Understanding and overcoming guilt, (4) What is family, (5) Growing up female, (6) Independent living, (7) Who should I turn to for help, and (8) Advocating for ourselves. The shelter residents are encouraged to suggest their own topics for discussion or choose from topics similar to those listed above.

Group members experience different stages of the group process as outlined in Corey & Corey, (1987): initial, transitional, working, and termination stages. However, due to the open-ended structure and the fluidity of the group population, every session must be somewhat complete and terminating. Many members go through the different stages of the group at different times geared to their own individual time-frame of shelter residency. At any given time, there might be participants experiencing any one of four different stages of group function.

There is an intensity built into the relationships that develop between shelter residents because of living in close proximity and the commonality of experiences. This allows, almost immediately, for the universality and cohesiveness that is experienced in the working stages of most groups. Other components of this stage such as trust, disclosure, and sense of belonging vary from one group member to the

next. This situation does not allow for optimal continuity in the group process. It does, however, allow for group members in the latter stages of group function to facilitate and support newcomers and transitional stage members. This facilitation and support contributes greatly to the connection-building between members.

Empowerment in Other Women's Groups

To explore possible applications of the process model in other women's groups settings, other groups presently functioning in the same community were identified. Several of these groups have been evaluated to determine the extent to which the process of personal empowerment occurred for women in different group settings. The groups evaluated were: (1) a rape survivors support group, (2) a community-based battered women's support group, (3) a women's issues therapy group in a private agency, (4) a self-help, elderly widows' support group in a community center and (5) a women's discussion/support group in a substance abuse recovery program. The groups' membership varied in number, ethnic and racial diversity, and the age of each member (ranging from age 18 to 91). The structure, length of time allotted for group work and facilitation style of each group was also varied. The members and facilitators of all five groups were female.

Evaluation of the Process Model

Theory Based Evaluation

A theory based evaluation was designed to gather preliminary data measuring the construct of the process model. Theory based evaluation of a program is one in which the selection of program features is determined by an explicit conceptualization of the program in terms of a theory or model, a theory which attempts to explain how the program produces desired effects (Fitz-Gibbon & Morris, 1990). Theories suggest variables to study and imply that certain outcomes are likely to occur from certain processes. The term "theory-based" evaluation, then, means an evaluation based on a model, theory, or philosophy about how a program works; a model, theory, or philosophy which indicates the causal relationships supposedly operating in the program.

Development of the Evaluation Instrument

The six components of the process model were operationalized and questions were constructed resulting from this operationalization. The following are the operational definitions of the six components: (1) Self-evaluation - looking inward and identifying feelings, responses, etc., relative to the expressed feelings and experiences of others, (2) Disclosure - recounting, within the group, one's experiences and giving voice to feelings and emotions, (3) Insight - developing an

awareness or understanding of how past experiences impact on present behaviors, feelings, competencies, and actions, (4) Mutuality - empathic understanding of other group members, giving support, receiving support - "bonding - building connections", (5) Competence - a feeling of confidence in the ability to affect change in one's behavior, recognizing strengths and building upon them, and (6) Action - any movement, no matter how slight, toward problem solving, taking charge of self. The context of connection was represented in Likert scale questions, especially in those measuring self evaluation, disclosure and mutuality. In the open-ended qualitative questions it was assumed the context of connection, if present, would be referred to in the narrative responses.

An evaluation instrument was constructed using two questions each for the six components contained in the process model. Each question was designed to obtain quantitative data on a 6-point Likert scale with answers ranging from (1) Agree to (6) Disagree. An answer of one indicated no movement, an answer of six indicated maximum movement toward empowerment with single increment selections in between. A six point scale was used to avoid a non-directional, middle answer. The phrasing was equally balanced, positively and negatively, to avoid any suggestion of bias in the desired responses. The instrument also contained open-ended questions designed to elicit qualitative information about each member's personal account of her group experience.

Participation

Each group member was asked to participate in the evaluation of her group experience by the group's facilitator. It was stressed that participation was voluntary and anonymous. All group members asked to fill out the questionnaires elected to participate. No information was given as to the purpose of the evaluation until after all questionnaires were completed.

Results

The results of the evaluations showed significant movement toward empowerment in each women's group surveyed. Each of the six components of the model, as operationalized, showed significant movement toward empowerment in both the quantitative and qualitative data.

In the quantitative section, the number indicating maximum movement toward empowerment for each component was twelve. The median score for each component was 7.00. The mean score for each component across all five groups evaluated ranged from 9.571 to 10.686 and is illustrated in a bar graph in Figure 2.

- Insert Figure 2 -

Insight and mutuality were the components receiving the highest mean scores consistently across all groups. The battered women's group had the highest mean scores across all six components with a range of 10.273 to 11.818. The widow's support group had the lowest mean scores overall, ranging from 8.5 to 9.9. The lowest individual mean of 7.75 was recorded for self-evaluation in the substance abuse recovery group. The mean scores for each individual group are illustrated in bar graphs in Figure 3.

- Insert Figure 3 -

The movement toward empowerment is illustrated most consistently in the battered women's and the rape survivor's groups. The authors assume the intensity and commonality were strongest in these two groups. The focus of the problem group members were addressing was narrowly defined in both groups. The "disempowerment" or disconnection of the battered women and rape survivors was more acute, easily recognized and therefore, possibly, more amenable to supportive group therapy. A strong element of the crisis intervention and therapeutic counseling for battered and sexually abused women is to help the women gain (or regain) a sense of self-confidence and the ability to make her own decisions (Gilliland & James, 1988). Primary internal components of the process model relative to these tasks are self evaluation, insight and competency.

The qualitative section of the evaluation instrument contained open-ended questions designed to provide insight into the women's own perspectives about group experience as told in her own voice. "When we ask questions about human affairs, the responses come in sentences, not numbers. We collect 'data' as narratives, stories" (Tesch, 1990, p. 2).

A cross-case analysis, the grouping together of answers from different people to common questions (Patton, 1990), was used to analyze the data collected from the open-ended questions. When asked to describe the group experience in their own words, some of the most frequently mentioned words contained in the narratives across all five groups were: understanding, connection, comfort, support, sharing and feedback. These words describe interactive events between group members within a relational context of connection.

Examples of the women's responses and the components of the model indicated include the following: " It has helped me to look more objectively at myself and my feelings" (*self-evaluation*). "It has also help(ed) me to start recognizing (*insight*) and correcting some undesirable behaviors" (*action*).

" I feel free! I can say how I feel (*disclosure*) and have time to say what I mean. The other women accept me for who I am" (*mutuality*). "I don't get slapped because I speak slow or because I can't get my thoughts straight. I am respected and that's very important to me (*competence*). I am not in my situation anymore because of this

group" (*action*). More examples of the responses to what it was like to be a group participant: "So good to know we all have the same feelings. More or less" (*insight*). "I feel I understand others much better" (*mutuality*). "I take home new knowledge every time. I share my thoughts and get feedback - it's extremely encouraging" (*insight and mutuality*).

Sixty-four percent (64%) of the respondents made reference to their sense of connection to the other group members. Through words or phrases such as, "friends, together with, common with others, part of the group, attached to the group, connection with other women, share with others" it was determined the respondents were describing the context of connection of the group.

When analyzing the results of this preliminary evaluation of the process model, the conclusion can be drawn that the model does illustrate a movement toward empowerment occurring within the evaluated women's groups. The process occurs, as depicted, beginning with commonality and moving through the six components, along internal and external vectors, toward empowerment in a relational context of connection.

Conclusions

The significance/importance of relationships and connection for women in working through emotional distress and building personal

empowerment is illustrated through the process model of empowerment presented in this paper. In recent years, a different way of describing self, by attending to the experience of women, has been clarified. In this alternative construction, self is known in the experience of connection and defined not by reflection but by interaction, the responsiveness of human engagement (Gilligan, Ward & Taylor, 1988). Women's groups, then, can provide opportunities to work through previous relational wounds within a sustaining relational context. "Both the 'there and then' and the 'here and now' relational experiences play key roles. As the woman experiences the juxtaposition of the hurtful past and the affirming present in a relational context, healing proceeds." (Fedele & Harrington, 1990, p. 3).

McWilliams and Stein (1987) found that clinicians consider women's groups the treatment of choice for dealing with particular life circumstances (e.g., post divorce, single mothers) or with particular clinical groups (e.g., sexual abuse survivors, battered wives or lovers). Group therapy provides a context in which members can appreciate and encourage one another's abilities. This relational context, coupled with the explicit and implicit message that every woman has the right to feel competent, fosters empowerment. (Fedele & Harrington, 1990).

The group process model of empowerment draws from both the current theories of women's psychological development and social interaction theory in illustrating the process toward empowerment occurring for females in group settings. The shelter group described in

this report is a good example of a practical application of theory, demonstrating how relationships and connections contribute to adult female development and empowerment. The evaluation of other women's groups demonstrates the occurrence of the empowerment process in diverse group settings and illustrated in the process model described in this report.

The process of instilling compassion for oneself and others, and engaging in mutually satisfying and empowering relationships can enrich our understanding of women's groups for work, study, support, peer supervision, friendship, business, research, activity, political action, governance, and peace keeping. For where women gather together, there exists a potentially rich relational context to foster growth. (Fedele & Harrington, 1990).

Personal empowerment for women is essential to changing the institutional and societal conditions that currently contribute to the "disempowerment" of women. Recognizing the importance of building connections and the resulting empowerment women derive from their relationships is the overriding result of this project. The heuristic value of identifying these concepts within women's' groups is apparent. The process model can serve to structure and enhance groups designed for women's empowerment. For where women gather together, there exists a potentially fertile environment to develop connections and attain personal empowerment.

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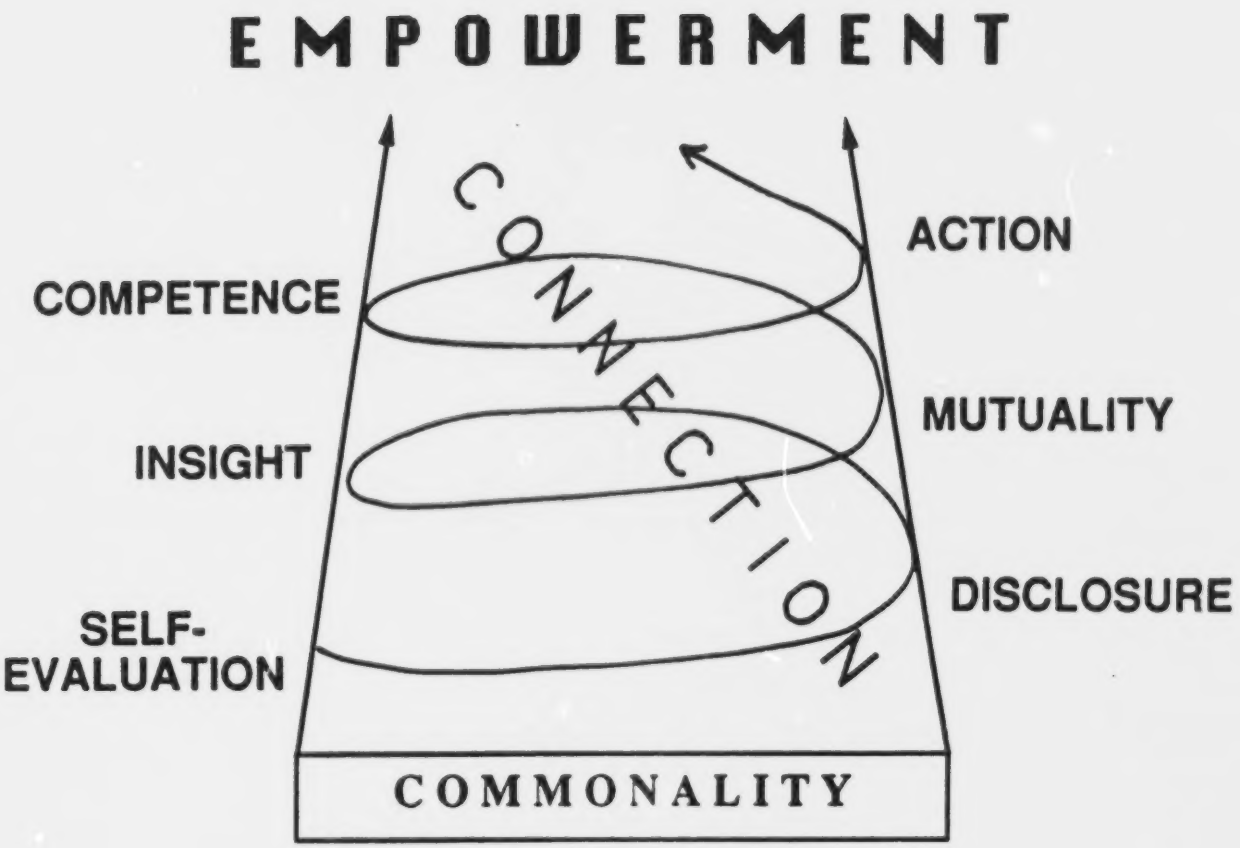
Figure Caption

Figure 1. The process model of personal empowerment.

Figure 2. Process evaluation of movement toward empowerment, all groups combined.

Figure 3. Process evaluation of movement toward empowerment for five individual group settings.

Figure 1.


EMPOWERMENT
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INSIGHT
DISCLOSURE
SELF-
EVALUATION
COMMONALITY

Figure 2.

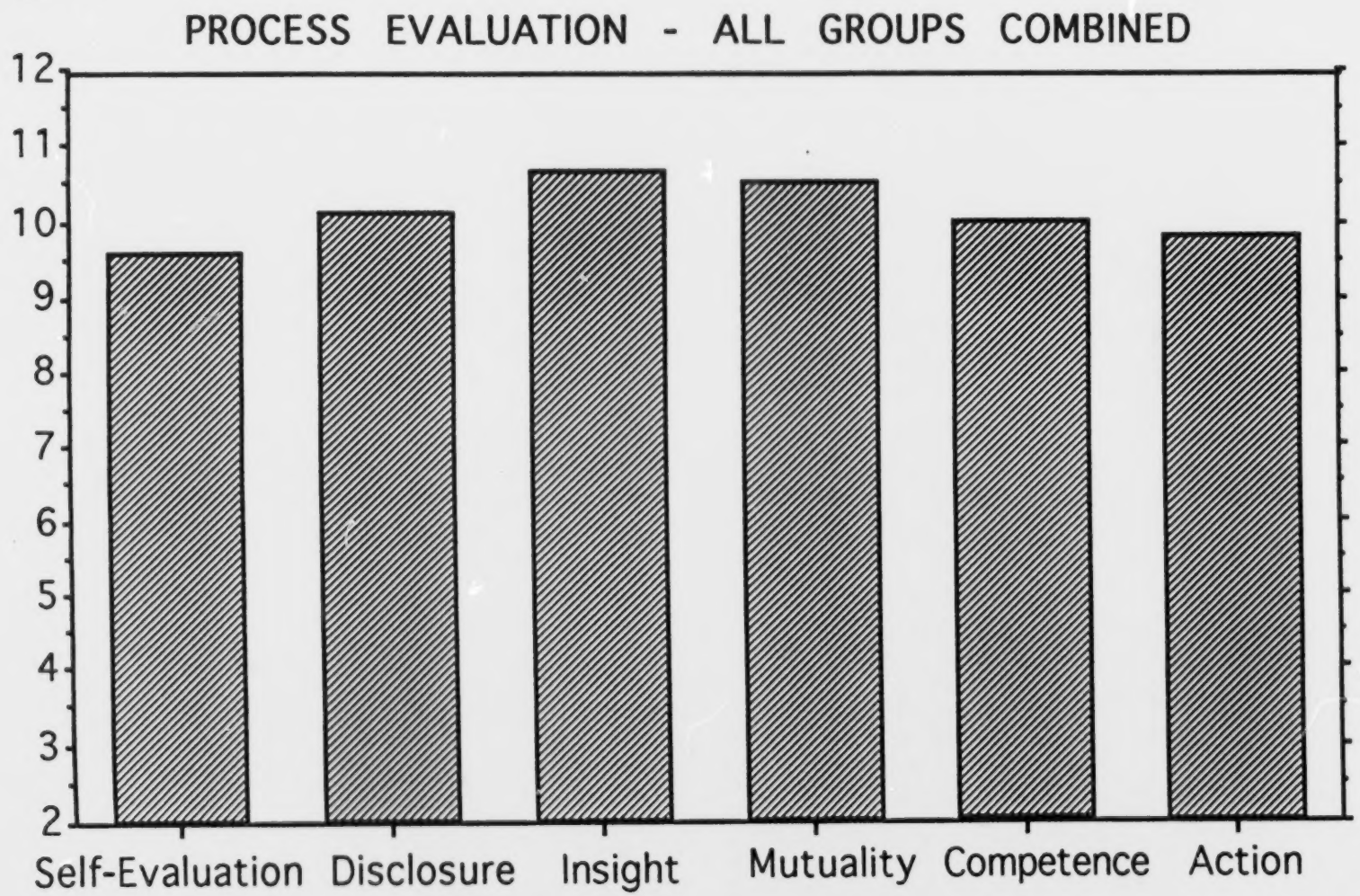
PROCESS EVALUATION - ALL GROUPS COMBINED
12
11
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
Self-Evaluation
Disclosure
Insight
Mutuality
Competence
Action
COMPONENTS OF THE PROCESS MODEL

Figure 3.

PROCESS EVALUATIONS - FIVE INDIVIDUAL GROUPS